

EXTRACT FROM "BABY AND CHILD CARE" BY BENJAMIN SPOCK M.D.

Should an adopted child be told he is adopted? All the experienced people in this field agree that the child should know. He's sure to find out sooner or later from someone or other, no matter how carefully the parents think they are keeping the secret. It is practically always a very disturbing experience for a child of any age, or even for an adult, to discover suddenly that he is adopted. It may shatter his sense of security for years. Supposing a baby has been adopted during his first year, when should he be told? The news shouldn't be saved for any definite age. The parents should, from the beginning, let the fact that he's adopted come openly, but casually, into their conversations with each other, with the child, and with their acquaintances. This creates an atmosphere in which the child can ask questions whenever he is at a stage of development where the subject interests him. He finds out what adoption means bit by bit, as he gains understanding.

Some adopting parents make the mistake of trying to keep the adoption secret, others make the opposite mistake of stressing it too much. If parents are inwardly uneasy about the fact that the child is adopted, and feel that, to be honest, they must always stress the point, the child will begin to wonder, "What's wrong with being adopted anyway?" But if they accept the adoption as naturally as they accept the colour of the child's hair, they won't have to make a secret of it, or keep throwing it in his face either.

Let's say that a child around 3 hears his mother explaining to a new acquaintance that he is adopted, and asks, "What's adopted, Mummy?" She might answer, "A long time ago I wanted to have a little baby boy very much to love and take care of. So I went to a place where there were a lot of babies, and I told the lady, 'I want a little boy with brown hair and brown eyes.' So she brought me a baby and it was you. And I said, 'Oh, this is just exactly the baby I want. I want to adopt him and take him home to keep for ever.' And that's how I adopted you." This makes a good beginning, because it emphasizes the positive side of the adoption, the fact that the mother received just what she wanted. The story will delight him and he'll want to hear it many times.

But somewhere between the ages of 3 and 4, if he is like most children, he will want to know where babies come from in the beginning. It is best to answer truthfully, but simply enough so that the 3 year old can understand easily. But when his adopted mother explains that babies grow inside the mother's abdomen, it will make him wonder how this fits in with the story of picking him out from all the other babies at the institution. Maybe then, or months later he'll ask, "Did I grow inside you?" Then the adopting mother can explain, simply and casually, that he grew inside another mother before he was adopted. This is apt to confuse him for a while, but he will get it clear later.

Eventually he will raise the more difficult question of why his own mother gave him up. To tell him that his mother didn't want him would shake his confidence in all mothers. Any sort of made-up reason may bother him later in some unexpected way. Perhaps the best answer and nearest to the truth might be, 'I don't know why she couldn't take care of you, but I'M sure she wanted to'. During the period when the child is digesting this idea, he needs to be reminded, along with a hug, that he's always going to be yours now.





The secret fear that the adopted child may have is that his adopting parents will some day give him up as his true parents did, if they should change their minds, or if he were bad. Adopting parents should always remember this and vow that they will never under any circumstances say or hint that the idea has ever crossed their minds of giving him up. One threat uttered in a thoughtless or angry moment might be enough to destroy the child's confidence in them for ever. They should be ready to let him know that he is theirs for ever at any time the question seems to enter his mind, for instance, when he is talking about his adoption. I'd like to add, though, that it's a mistake for the adopting parents to worry so about the child's security that they over-emphasise their talk of loving him. Basically, the thing that gives the adopted child the greatest security is being loved, wholeheartedly and naturally.

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